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### Popular music and postmodern theory

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## POPULAR MUSIC AND POSTMODERN THEORY

**T**he debate about postmodernism now intersects popular music at a number of distinct levels:

1 *MTV/music television* In the work of Tetzlaff (1986), Fiske (1986), Aufderheide (1986), Wollen (1986), and Kaplan (1987), the postmodern nature of MTV and music television is identified through diverse criteria such as: the fusion of modernist high art and more popular cultural discourses; the abandonment of grand narrative structures, including the deconstruction of both realist and modernist regimes of representation, and the deconstruction of the TV schedule itself; the presence of intertextuality and pastiche; and in what Kaplan sees as a 'schizophrenic' posthumanist address.

I have criticized these ideas elsewhere (Goodwin, 1987a), and do not wish to take up much space here to repeat my argument. The objections to the postmodern interpretation of music television can engage with its reading of the relation between film theory and music videos, its near-total neglect of the music itself, its failure to locate the clips adequately within the context of pop-music culture, or its superficial understanding of pastiche. Here I will just note one of the major *empirical* problems: MTV itself has spent the years since the emergence of postmodern theory blatantly defying the terms of postmodernity. While there are superficial parallels, such as the creation of a category of 'postmodern video' (which I will discuss later), the organization of both the video clips and the MTV text itself has been increasingly traditional and convention-bound. Most notably, it is strange to discover that a media form whose postmodernity was supposedly secured partly through its 24-hour 'flow' and abandonment of traditional scheduling practices, has – over the last five years – progressively established rigid program slots and begun utilizing the routine practices of TV scheduling, often around the deployment of conventional broadcast-TV genres.

2 *The music itself* Pop music artists and texts have also been employed as textual 'examples' which are used to illustrate theories of the postmodern (Jameson, 1984 and 1988). In relation to the music itself, I will try to show later in this essay that while it is possible to discover categories of postmodern music and perhaps practices of postmodern consumption, the

grand claims of postmodern theory remain insubstantial as an account of the current state of popular music.

3 *Technology* Technological developments within the popular music industry suggest interesting parallels with some postmodern theses, although these correspondences have only been taken up by advocates of postmodern theory in passing. Specifically, these critical strategies miss both the historicizing function of sampling technologies in contemporary pop (Goodwin, 1988) and the ways in which textual incorporation cannot be adequately understood as 'blank parody'. We need other categories to add to pastiche, which demonstrate how contemporary pop opposes, celebrates and promotes the texts it steals from (see Goodwin, 1987b). I have also noted that the technologies of sampling and musical theft are not used only to construct images that speak of fakery and forgery (McRobbie, 1986); they are also used to invoke history and authenticity – the most obvious recent example being the collaboration between sixties soul star James Brown and eighties rappers Full Force, in making a record significantly titled *I'm Real*.<sup>1</sup> We need to know how pastiche actually relates to the blurring of historical periodization, where it has often been overlooked that the 'quoting' of sounds and styles acts to historicize contemporary culture (although Lipsitz, 1986/7 and Straw, 1988 are atypically careful on that question).

4 *Structures of Feeling* Postmodern theory has provided one interesting entry point for understanding the consumption of popular music, and this lies in Fred Pfeil's (1985 and 1988) deployment of Raymond Williams' notion of 'structures of feeling'. Pfeil argues from a sociological and psychoanalytic point of view, delineating the material base of the post-war American 'PMC' (professional-managerial class) in the break-up of urban centres, the (related) decline of patriarchal authority, the rise of television at the core of a public sphere, and the growing importance of leisure consumption in the construction of identity. This sociological account of a structure of feeling suggests rich possibilities for a historical materialist account of postmodern culture (see Grossberg, 1988) . . . although it also alerts us to what may be its limited social purchase.

This, ultimately sociological, project remains underdeveloped empirically but suggests a mode of analysis that is less concerned with identifying postmodern texts, in favour of looking at the emergence of reading formations which celebrate pastiche, and ahistorical modes of consumption. (The account has the merit of also explaining the popularity of postmodern theory amongst those American academics who hail from precisely that reading formation.)

5 *'Postmodern rock'* 'Postmodern rock' has itself emerged as a sales category within the music industry, and within music television (for instance, in MTV's programme *Post Modern MTV*).

This essay confronts these developments with the aim of clarifying what is at stake. Here I share Hebdige's (1988) carefully qualified view that the term 'postmodernism', while hampered by its incoherence, is so wide-ranging that it must be describing something. (Other, more cynical, observers have

suggested that the label is the fanciful creation of critics and scholars, but that this process brings into being a 'real' cultural category, through its effects on producers, critics and consumers.) My central argument is that the debate is currently confused by the presentation of binary polarities within limited fields of reference, and through the mixing up of two categories that need to be distinguished – cultural capital and aesthetic form. I will begin by examining two aspects of the debate about postmodernism and pop music, which have their roots respectively in arguments about aesthetic form (see Lukacs, *et al.*, 1977) and in the analysis of cultural capital most eloquently developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1980 and 1984). I will proceed to show that confusion between these two debates has led to incoherence in the postmodern analysis of pop and rock music. Finally, this paper will consider the emergence of 'postmodern rock' as a generic category within the music industry.

### In search of the postmodern text

Confronted by the divergent nature of postmodern accounts of culture, scholars have tended to work very ineffectively with the specific empirical demands of understanding popular music. The debate about postmodernism is certainly not notable for the precision of its definitions; as many commentators have observed, it is often unclear whether postmodernism is a cultural condition or new theoretical paradigm. There is also confusion around the question of whether postmodernism deploys irony, or a post-ironic discourse of 'blank parody'. And in the analysis of cultural capital, postmodernists have often confused *intertextuality* with the mere blurring of generic categories, and then gone on to read the collapse of aesthetic distinctions into these processes, as if they necessarily imply the latter, which they do not.

Some writers argue that rock music is postmodern by virtue of its eclecticism, through its foundations in interracial, intercultural and intertextual practices (e.g., McRobbie, 1986; Hebdige, 1988; Weinstein, 1989). Lipsitz (1986/7) provides the most fully empirical version of this position. His argument is acute and important, although in my opinion its references to postmodernism are largely redundant. Empirically, Lipsitz cannot be faulted for his observation that rock music is characterized by extraordinary eclecticism and intertextuality: specifically, his argument relates postmodern concepts to Mexican-American musics developed by musicians in East Los Angeles, including the internationally popular band Los Lobos. But, like all accounts which use eclecticism as their founding postmodern motif, it is hard to see what is being *explained* here. The logic that one typically finds is this: postmodernism employs eclecticism and intertextuality; rock music is eclectic and intertextual; *ergo*, rock music is postmodern. But what does this tell us about rock music or postmodernism, other than that they might explain *each other*? (In other words, postmodernism might as well be a parasite *description* of post-war pop, rather than an explanatory paradigm.)

If the textual specifics of pop's genres are merely redundant (if, in fact, one believes that rock, pop and contemporary music *tout court* are postmodern in some more general sense), then what is the point of analyzing them? There is an urgent need to clarify the terms of this debate. Unsurprisingly, given the confusion of its terms, the identification of postmodern texts has ranged across an extraordinarily divergent, and incoherent, profusion of textual instances: John Cage, Steve Reich, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Prince, punk rock, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, the British 'New Pop' (Thompson Twins, Scritti Politti, Duran Duran, Thomas Dolby, etc.) Sique Sique Sputnik, rap, hip-hop, Los Lobos, and World Beat music have all been cited as quintessentially postmodern.

This *eclecticism of theory* is extremely unhelpful. It stems in part from an initial confusion of two debates, which postmodern theory fails to distinguish. Firstly, there is a debate within 'serious' avant-garde circles about the trajectory of modernist music in the age of Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley (see, for a brief and accessible account, Jones, 1987). Secondly, there are debates within popular music about pastiche and authenticity. 'Modernism' means something quite different within each of these two fields, for in the first area it has been the dominant aesthetic strategy, while in the latter it remains – within different genres – everything from utterly marginal to coexistent with older, realist forms. Hence the term 'postmodern' not only describes different musical (and extra-musical) strategies, it also relates quite differently to the field of cultural power, and to the possession of cultural and economic capital in each area.

This confusion is obvious in an early formative attempt to understand rock music in postmodern terms – Fredric Jameson's (1984) deployment of rock and roll in the initial moment of bringing postmodernism into the cultural studies academy (a position which has recently been restated without revision in Jameson, 1988).<sup>2</sup> Commenting on Jameson's analysis of architecture, Mike Davis has recently written that 'Jameson's postmodernism tends to homogenize the details of the contemporary landscape, to subsume under a master concept too many contradictory phenomena which, though undoubtedly visible in the same chronological moment, are none the less separated in their true temporalities' (Davis, 1988: 80). The same can be said of Jameson's analysis of music, which offers a reading of rock history that places The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, on the one hand, as examples of 'high modernism' and The Clash, Talking Heads and the Gang of Four, on the other, as 'postmodern'. What this broad classification of music elides, however, is the necessity of identifying musical differences within the two historical moments which suggest more specific, if still crude, parameters of rock 'realism' (The Clash) and rock 'modernism' (Talking Heads, Gang of Four), and of rock 'authenticity' (The Stones) versus pop artifice (The Beatles).

Historically, the music of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones articulated the social and political currents of the 1960s counter-culture. The Clash and The Gang of Four (the latter being explicitly Marxist in orientation) addressed political questions from a standpoint associated with the

emergence of punk rock – a quite different counter-cultural form which eschewed the love and peace message of The Beatles or the nihilistic hedonism of The Stones in favour of blunt left-wing critiques of life in Britain in the late 1970s.

Looked at from the point of view of aesthetic form, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones need to be differentiated: if the development of modernism is at issue here, the increasingly artificial (up until the last, posthumous 1970 LP *Let It Be*) of The Beatles is modernist (self-conscious, ironic, knowingly artificial), in contrast with the ‘authentic’ rough-edged blues inflections of The Stones and their lyrical themes of sexuality and violence. The Beatles, it might be argued, typified a notion of musical ‘progress’, where The Rolling Stones (with the exception of their Beatles-influenced album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*) simply repeated a rhythm and blues formula which typifies a form of rock realism (e.g., in both the social content of their lyrics, and in the transparent, unselfconscious nature of the music itself). That The Stones have mined this groove almost unrelentingly is apparent in the critical responses and marketing strategies which framed their 1989 LP *Steel Wheels* – an album that was reviewed and discussed in terms of its ‘truth’ to an older rhythm and blues aesthetic. (Paul McCartney, in contrast, spent 1989 and 1990 on tour with a band who play extracts from The Beatles’ inaugural art-rock album *Sgt Pepper*.)

When we move on to the music of the late 1970s, there is another very clear distinction to be made between realist and modernist musics. The Clash are, in this context (and in many other ways) the Rolling Stones of the punk era with their ‘realist’ raw sound, their incorporation of ‘black’ musical genres (R&B for The Stones, reggae for The Clash), and in the effort to be transparent in their musical and lyrical communication with the audience. Talking Heads<sup>3</sup> and The Gang of Four are explicitly modernist in orientation – offering such classic modernist techniques as ambiguity, self-reflexivity, use of shock effects and deconstructions of song structure and tonal rationality.

Jameson’s first efforts to grapple with rock music from within an account of the postmodern condition remain, then, empirically quite unconvincing – a criticism that has often been made of the *detail* of the textual illustration deployed in what must now be considered the founding essays of a Marxist postmodernism. But while later efforts to work with this theory in relation to popular music are certainly better informed about the music, there is a noticeable shift in orientation, away from Jameson’s concern with the relation between social formation and aesthetic form, in favour of an emphasis upon cultural capital and the apparent dismantling of distinctions between art and mass culture.

### But is it Art?

In recent debates about postmodernism, it is often quite casually assumed that we are now living in an era where distinctions between art and mass culture have collapsed. Popular music is sometimes used to establish this

argument, and in postmodern writing on pop the elision of high art and pop culture is usually taken for granted. A central problem in these accounts, as I will show, is the conceptual tension that exists between postmodernism's insistence on eclecticism in contemporary culture, and its focus on the apparent conflation of art and mass culture.

Much of this work suffers from two debilitating limitations. Firstly, it often misreads the argument about cultural capital as though the presence or absence of particular aesthetic discourses could be discerned through the identification of timeless historical features, instead of undertaking a conjunctural analysis of the mobilizing categories of cultural power. As Andrew Ross has reminded us, via Bourdieu: 'Cultural power does not inhere in the contents of categories of taste. On the contrary, it is exercised through the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste; it is the power to define where each relational category begins and ends, and the power to determine what it contains at any one time.' (Ross, 1989: 61). Within the field of contemporary popular music, the processes of selection, exclusion, celebration and denigration are used by critics, fans and the musicians themselves in ways that continue to sustain the operation of forms of cultural capital. In particular there remains a tendency to identify as 'serious' those acts who subvert and undermine the conventions of the pop song, often in ways that are classically modernist. This process operates *within* generic categories as well as across the whole field of pop, so that art/pop distinctions can be made (and *are* made, by fans and critics), respectively, in mainstream pop (Pet Shop Boys/New Kids On the Block), soul (Prince/Michael Jackson), rock (Sonic Youth/U2), heavy metal (Metallica/Def Leppard), and rap (Public Enemy/MC Hammer). The briefest of conversations with almost any fan of one of the above acts would confirm that arguments about art versus trash remain rampant within today's pop.

Secondly, postmodern theory establishes its categories too easily, by defining discourses of art and mass culture through the use of extremely limited terms of reference. A standard strategy is the presentation of two bi-polar opposites which are held to signify art, on the one hand, and mass culture, on the other. The writer will then show how they have increasingly converged, thus magically bringing the truth of postmodernism to light. What is usually missing are all the various genres of pop music which lie *outside* the binary opposition, and which may run counter to the analysis.

Jon Stratton's (1989) account of three key moments in rock history and their relation to aesthetic categories pays much closer attention to musical meanings and is more historically specific in its arguments than Jameson's early typology. Yet it, too, contains a curious flaw. Stratton identifies a convergence of popular and high cultural discourses in rock's third 'moment', *circa* 1975–9, when a 'postmodern' aesthetic (Stratton's description) of minimalism in form, combined with excessive affect, straddles both popular culture (the punk rock of The Sex Pistols, for instance) and the art-music of Brian Eno, Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass. This makes sound musicological sense, but its usefulness is diminished by the sociological realities of pop consumption. Eno, Anderson, and Glass *are* consumed as

high-art, with the exception of Eno's work with the pop group Roxy Music (and even there he was portrayed as the freakish, arty boffin, to Brian Ferry's populist neo-Sinatra), and Anderson's freakish 1983 hit single 'O Superman'. For many pop fans, Eno is known as someone who helps to produce the rock group U2 (and perhaps Talking Heads), not as an avant-garde or postmodern composer. In that area his work is closely associated with art-rock; so much so that a recent musicological account of Eno places his solo work firmly in a tradition of 'progressive rock' (Tamm, 1989) – a category which should be (as I will demonstrate later) anathema to postmodernism. Musicologically, Stratton's account is persuasive; sociologically it demonstrates the limits of text analysis (however well-grounded historically) when confronted with the actual practices of pop consumption.

What the postmodernists frequently miss in their accounts of popular music are the continuing presence of the categories of the popular and the artistic. There are, in a sense, two Brian Enos: Eno the avant-garde musician and Eno the popular record producer – and the audience for *both* Enos is probably infinitesimal. Scholars accustomed to listening to Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass and even Talking Heads run the danger of greatly overestimating their impact in pop culture, and – most importantly – the crucial elements of cultural capital that attach to them.

It seems to me almost redundant to have to point out the sociological specifics that place, say, Philip Glass in the category of art-pop, but in this context it seems important to spell out the details: Glass does not produce music which is recognizably like a pop song; lyrics, where they are used, deviate from the conventional modes of address of pop<sup>4</sup> and the structural and (poly)rhythmic content of his pieces deviates from rock convention. For instance, while much has been made of the superficial resemblance between the music of Philip Glass and rock through their shared emphasis on *repetition*, this misses the point that Glass's music takes this technique to extremes that are rarely deployed in pop. Because he defies the recognized forms of rock and pop music, Philip Glass albums are usually found in record stores under headings such as 'Classical', 'Jazz' and (a telling insult) 'New Age'. His concerts take place in halls associated with classical and modern music performances, rather than rock clubs or stadia. In solo performance, the staging of his music reflects the 'serious' conventions of the venue (e.g., the absence of dramatic use of lighting, stage set or visual effects). When the Philip Glass Ensemble performs its operatic works, the staging is highly visual – but the conventions are those of the art-rock 'concept' performance (Pink Floyd, Genesis, etc.), not a rock and roll show. Glass (1987: 3–26) himself makes the influence of modernist artists like Beckett, Brecht, Pinter and Godard quite explicit here – influences that are also very clearly at work in the performances of Laurie Anderson.<sup>5</sup> The behavior of the audience is in either case reverential and distanced, listening attentively to the music, rather than moving, cheering or singing along.<sup>6</sup> Artists like Glass, Eno and Laurie Anderson in fact occupy a space within contemporary pop that reproduces the position of progressive rock and art-rock in the 1960s and 1970s. It is music for college students and

middle-class graduates who have the cultural capital to decode the significance of its heightened use of repetition, its minimalism, and its shifting of attention away from the pop star and towards multi-media contextualization. The music may share an abstract principle with rock and roll (a basis in the use of repetitive structures), but its sound and staging hardly resemble that world at all.

I want now to develop these criticisms, by making two points, which operate at discrete levels. First, empirically speaking, each of the different attempts to substantiate the legitimacy of postmodern theory operates by bracketing out vast areas of contemporary pop that contradict the theory. Secondly, and more fundamentally, each of these approaches establishes the category of postmodernism by setting up binary oppositions from within extremely limited (and quite divergent) fields of reference. Categories of the postmodern which are constructed around oppositions such as punk/pop, authenticity/artifice, rock/New Pop, modernist rock/postmodern pop and so forth each leave out too much – indeed, the *absences* are precisely what allows each account to seem coherent. (This problem in its turn derives partially from the fact that analysts have tended to focus on just one or two aspects of the debate about postmodernism, thus generating entirely different, and sometimes contradictory, positions using the same conceptual field. The problem, in other words, is that the conceptual field is itself unstable.)

A way out of this confusion is suggested, in my view, by Susan McClary's (1989) careful analysis of avant-garde and postmodern musics. McClary's definition of the postmodern is tight and focused, centering on art-music which abandons the 'difficulty' of high modernism (e.g., Schoenberg) in favor of popular, pleasurable devices such as tonality, melody and simpler rhythms. It thus represents an account of the postmodern which (reasonably, if unusually) relates that category to modernism itself. For McClary, the quintessential postmodern composers are Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Laurie Anderson. Her account offers a definition of postmodern music which has the merit of being clearly argued and coherent. However, in revealing the limited appeal of postmodern music (none of these artists are mass sellers) amongst audiences for 'serious' music, McClary's arguments undermine a central tenet of postmodern theory – the notion of a convergence of art and mass culture.

The confusion arises because postmodern theory has mixed up two different issues – the identification of eclecticism (which pervades rock and pop) and the collapse of distinctions based on cultural capital (which remain pervasive, especially *within* the field of rock music, as Frith and Horne (1987) have shown). When this mistake is laid over the misapprehension that modernism operates in the field of pop music just as it does in 'serious' modern music, the result is conceptual chaos. Whatever its inroads in the visual codes of television (Brechtian devices in prime-time programming, modernist jump cuts in soap-powder commercials, etc.), the much neglected *aural* codes of music are a different matter. While modernist techniques are accepted by the gatekeepers of high culture, in the market-place of

commerce the sounds of dissonance are not so welcome. Today's rap music, like punk rock before it, encounters extraordinary difficulty in gaining airplay and media exposure precisely because its *sounds*, as much as its sentiments, are not conducive to a commercial environment. The music is, in classic modernist tradition, *disruptive*. It would be interesting to consider further the reasons for this disjuncture between visual and aural modernism in the market-place. For my purpose here, I simply wish to note the pertinence of Georgina Born's comments:

It is odd and significant that music is so often cited as the success story of postmodern reintegration . . . Effectively, these cultural theorists collude in asserting that the postmodern *rapprochement* has been achieved . . . It is not only by ignoring the hegemonic 'other' of powerful, contemporary high culture, and failing to deconstruct its rhetoric of *rapprochement*, that writers have arrived at their optimistic and utopian postmodern perspectives. The assertion that modern music culture is moving beyond the modernist/populist divide to achieve a postmodern synthesis or reintegration must be based on empirical study . . . rather than making facile assertions, it is necessary to analyse real socio-economic and aesthetic differences that exist. (1989: 70)

This seems to me to be the problem, for instance, with Lawrence Levine's (1988) tendency to see the collapse of cultural categories in the work of The Kronos Quartet (a San Francisco act who have worked with Philip Glass, and whose repertoire includes string quartet arrangements of Jimi Hendrix songs) as an example, along with numerous instances where jazz has been incorporated into high cultural institutions. It might be possible to cite The Kronos Quartet as postmodern, but as with Philip Glass, they clearly have very little to do with popular culture as it is actually lived by fans of rock and pop. And the argument about jazz was countered in the late 1970s by Roger Taylor (1978), in an essay written against what he saw as the *incorporation* of a radical musical form via its integration into the category of 'Art'.

There is a parallel with Taylor's account of jazz within rock music itself. It is noticeable, for instance, that postmodern accounts do not, as they might be tempted to do, invoke the development of art-rock following the 1967 release of The Beatles LP *Sgt Pepper*, or the subsequent flowering of 'progressive rock', which had both modernist (Velvet Underground, Henry Cow, Soft Machine, Hatfield and the North) and neo-classical (Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Genesis, Pink Floyd, Yes) aspirations. There is evidence for an art/mass culture fusion in a variety of elements here: the specific use of texts from high culture (beginning with Procul Harum's appropriation of Bach's Suite No. 3 in D major in 'A Whiter Shader Of Pale' and continuing with pieces such as Emerson, Lake & Palmer's versions of Aaron Copland's 'Hoedown', Ravel's 'Bolero' – which in structure significantly parallels the later work of Philip Glass – and Mussorgsky's *Pictures From An Exhibition*); neo-classical performances featuring rock bands with symphony orchestras (Deep Purple, Rick Wakeman); the use of poetry and prose rendered outside the context of a rock lyric (Henry Cow, Rick Wakeman,

David Bowie's use of 'cut-ups'); attempts to expand the pop song to twenty-minute pieces, sometimes linked across more than one side of an album (eg, Yes's *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, Jethro Tull's *Thick As A Brick*) – a trend which reached a peak in ELP's pretentiously titled double album *Works*; the rejection of the gestures of rock performance, in favour of a neo-operatic 'acting out' of the songs (David Bowie, Genesis) or 'serious' strategies, such as having the lead guitarist seated on a stool (King Crimson, Genesis); performances in neo-classical settings (Pink Floyd's album/movie *Live At Pompeii*); and instances of rock musicians citing and using classical and modern symphonic works to 'educate' the rock audience – employing an extract from Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, for instance, as an introductory theme to a rock concert (e.g., *Yessongs*).

These instances are not generally cited, of course, because they work against a central premise of postmodernism. Art-music in the pop context confirms the vague notion of eclecticism, and buttresses superficial descriptions of intertextuality, while it *undermines* the postmodern thesis of cultural fusion, in its explicit effort to preserve a bourgeois notion of Art in opposition to mainstream, 'commercial' rock and pop. The genre of progressive rock is clearly a declining (albeit a persistent) one, but my example is none the less instructive, since it is a discourse which persists. Following the emergence of punk rock (which had its own art wing, typified by bands like Devo, Talking Heads, Cabaret Voltaire, 23 Skidoo and Wire), a number of New Wave bands have effectively replaced the progressive rock acts as favorites amongst students and college-educated consumers (Hüsker Du, New Order, The Sugarcubes, The Replacements, Public Image Limited). This is particularly so in the United States, where the most important ideological component of punk rock (a progressive sweeping away of the rock establishment) has had very little lasting effect. Three of the acts mentioned above toured North America in 1989 under a 'Monsters of Art' rubric – a slogan which marks itself out from the 'Monsters Of Rock' label used to promote heavy metal bands. (As I will show in the final section of this paper, that particular definition of art-rock is almost co-terminous with one understanding of the term 'postmodern rock'.)

Indeed, the progressive rock/postmodern rock connection is, as I write, about to be institutionalized in British broadcasting, in a forthcoming program on the BBC's art-music service, Radio 3:

### PROG ROCK

Radio 3 chiefs have agreed to roll over Beethoven to make way for a new programme which will bring rock to the classical station. The BBC's hitherto conservative network have enlisted the help of two young(ish) rocking fellows to boost their listenership on a new show *Mixing It*.

From next month you can tune in to a meaty musical stew which includes Peter Gabriel, Laurie Anderson, Brian Eno, Philip Glass and the godfather of minimalism, Steve Reich. (*New Musical Express*, 29 September 1990)

Far from constituting a crossover phenomenon, yesterday's prog rockers,

like today's postmodernists, explicitly marked themselves out from the field of 'pop' in rejection of the structural form of the pop song, their use of complex, dissonant, forms of tonality, and in the absence of lyrical themes centered on romance, escape or 'the street'. Progressive rock bands aspired to a cultural capital of Art, and anyone who doubts that Steve Reich still does this should read his program notes, which unambiguously locate the music within institutional contexts of serious music, and which describe the music itself with a reverence which is, to my rock fan's sensibility, rather comic:

*Sextet* for four percussionists and two keyboard players is scored for three marimbas, two vibraphones, two bass drums, crotales, sticks, tam-tam, two pianos and two synthesisers.

The work is in five movements played without pause. The relationship of the five movements is that of an arch form A-B-C-B-A. The first and last movements are fast, the second and fourth moderate, and the third, slow. Changes of tempo are made abruptly at the beginning of new movements by metric modulation to either get slower or faster . . . The harmonies used are largely dominant chords with added tones creating a somewhat darker, chromatic, and more varied harmonic language than in my earlier works.<sup>7</sup>

My point is *not* that this description of the music intrinsically establishes Reich's work as art-music. Pop and rock can also be described in these ways; and it frequently is, in musician's magazines like *Guitar Player*, and in the occasional forays made by 'serious' critics into pop (see, for example, Mellers, 1973). My point is rather that this critical discourse illustrates a manner of promoting the music and assumes a mode of listening both of which are the antithesis of popular music.

Another way of arguing for Reich as a postmodernist is in his use of Third World musics. Weinstein (1989), among others, has implied that the phenomenon of World Beat music is postmodern by virtue of its generic confluences. (As I have already suggested, if this is true, then the whole of rock music must also be postmodern.) A problem here, for the art-pop fusion argument, is that African percussion techniques played in a Western concert hall (Reich's 1971 composition *Drumming*, for instance) where the audience is immobile and the performers enact the music with the gestures and costume of the 'serious' musician can no longer be heard as 'popular' or 'folk' music. (Furthermore, it seems to me it might also be objected that Reich's use of Third World folk music is, in the concert hall environment in which it is usually performed, no more postmodern than is, for instance, Haydn's use of European folk.)

More pertinently, there persists a modernist strand in pop music which continues to draw on masculinist traditions of noise, *music concrete* and Futurism, in both the sounds and the (sometimes neo-fascist or proto-Soviet) iconography used to promote the music. This music has thus taken up the modernist strand of progressive rock; a fact that is made biographically

concrete in the career of drummer Chris Cutler, who played with art-rock acts Henry Cow and The Art Bears in the 1970s, and who now performs with one of punk's original art-groups, Pere Ubu. The continuity is apparent in this comment from rock musician Billy Bragg, concerning the transparent connection between Russian constructivism and British electro-pop: 'If Mayakovsky had been alive today he'd have been in Depeche Mode.'<sup>8</sup> Here I would cite the 'industrial' bands like Nitzer Ebb, Front 242, Laibach and Ministry, and avant-garde rock noise-makers like Sonic Youth (who defy pop codes in part by using a variety of unconventional guitar tunings) as the most obvious examples. There is also the use of politicized *bricolage* and dissonance in American rap music (mobilized around images of drugs, gangs and crime), and a heavy metal/thrash metal wing articulating this same discourse (but with a different iconography – horror and Satanism). Crucially, many of these acts display an unrelenting hostility to mass culture, especially television (Beatnigs, Negativland, Wire, Metallica, Megadeth, Public Enemy, NWA, Ice-T). Their perceived authenticity derives in no small measure from their *antipathy to popular culture*, and this remains a crucial nuance of contemporary pop that postmodern critics consistently overlook.

The music of Public Enemy, for instance (*It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, *Fear Of A Black Planet*), can be seen as postmodern in its use of a modernist dissonance within the framework of mass popularity (via CBS Records). But the debate about rap (which is so often cited as a postmodern musical form, because of the pervasive intertextuality implied by its use of 'sampling') routinely overlooks the continuing presence of an art/mass culture discourse located in resistance to it; i.e., the continuing arguments (which precisely reproduce debates about rock and roll in the 1950s, and punk rock in the 1970s) about whether or not rap 'really' is *music*. These debates can be followed in arenas as diverse as conversations between rock and rap fans, published rock criticism, music-business institutions such as the Grammy awards, and in the arts pages of the élite press. If postmodernist critics paid the slightest attention to these accounts of popular music they would know that the battle against bourgeois notions of culture is waged, every day, by acts like Public Enemy, whose 'postmodernism' (if it is such) exists in a totally different environment from the music of Philip Glass *et al.*, and where the struggle for *modernism* (let alone *postmodernism*) cannot yet be taken for granted.

Just as social divisions persist and underlie the construction of supposedly postmodern buildings (Davis, 1988; Jacoby, 1987: 169–72), so they are also replicated in the market-place for contemporary music. Postmodern music, whether defined tightly as a form which develops in opposition to the difficulty of the avant-garde (McClary's usage, which in my view remains the only meaningful sense in which postmodern *texts* can be identified, since it is the only approach which shows how music might be related to a dominant modernism), or more loosely as an intertextual movement in more mainstream pop, often erases itself on the terrain of cultural capital. The abolition of the art/mass culture distinction is not apparent in either instance, for postmodern pop remains in most cases either an explicitly high

cultural form, or a pop form constructed in at least partial opposition to 'inauthentic' popular culture (TV, advertising, mainstream pop).

### Coda: hyper-marketing postmodernism

It is not possible to provide a neat 'conclusion' to this discussion. Since I maintain that the premises of postmodern theory are incoherent and that its aesthetic is a grab-bag of interesting observations which do not necessarily belong together, it follows that conclusions about the nature of postmodern music will depend on which part of the postmodern condition we choose to stress. Arguments about *aesthetic form* produce one way of looking at pop music. The concept of *cultural capital* produces quite different results. The relationship between the two is extremely complex. Looked at from the point of view of tonality or narrative structure, it can be argued quite convincingly that modernism persists as an art-rock form within pop, amongst those acts who defy the description of popular music set out in Adorno's classic (1941) article. (Indeed, one good reason for arguing for the continued distinction between pop music and art-rock lies in the fact that the 'postmodern' artists precisely subvert the conventions of pop that Adorno described so well, but failed to understand.) If, however, the focus were on *timbre*, then the noise of rock music (especially in the use of distorted electric guitar sounds) would be modernist in a much more general sense,<sup>9</sup> and the relation between aesthetic form and cultural capital would have to be thought through differently. The notion of *pastiche*, on the other hand, would generate entirely different conclusions – it might form a basis for seeing postmodernism in contemporary acts as diverse as Prince, Transvision Vamp and The Mekons, where it *does* seem that 'blank parody' is an accurate term for the self-referential deployment of 'found' music.

Unless we are committed to demonstrating the coherence or explanatory purpose of postmodern theory (which I am not), there is no need to construct rational order from these confusions. In order to grapple adequately with these issues, we need both a better theory of pop music (which would include, for example, some investigation of the relation between *timbre* and modernism) and more empirical work on today's pop audience. 'More work needs to be done' is however a boring conclusion, even where it is true. I will finish instead by noting one of the most bizarre developments in the brief history of media and cultural studies, in which abstruse French theory has 'trickled down' into the popular consciousness, via the cultural industries, so that the word 'postmodern' reached record stores, magazines and television programmes just a few years after it entered the academy: proponents of postmodernism will no doubt feel that this phenomenon is itself hugely postmodern.

As if to confuse the debate further still, the music industry has now pitched in with its own effort to define the terms of our debate, with the emergence (around 1988) of the new category of 'postmodern rock'. MTV was a pioneer in this trend, labelling its 'alternative' rock program *Post Modern MTV*, in August 1988. Record companies then began to adopt the term,

using it to promote records by Thrashing Doves, Pere Ubu and Peter Case. Pop stars like Elvis Costello and Bono (of U2) began to use the term in media interviews. Across these usages, from French theorist Jean Baudrillard (the subject of 1988 articles in both *The Face* and *Rolling Stone*)<sup>10</sup> to the musings of a Christian rock vocalist, there is of course little coherence.

Talking to students about the term 'postmodern rock' I have been able to discover three distinct usages. For some consumers it seems to correspond roughly with categories like 'art rock', 'indie pop' or 'college radio' music – that is to say, acts who define themselves as existing outside the mainstream of the charts, and whose music is supposed to be taken more seriously than the supposedly disposable sounds of pop. (This interpretation buttresses my argument above, of course, since it implies the conventional division between rock and pop, with the former having artistic pretensions not deemed appropriate for the latter.) This seems to be the understanding employed in the music industry itself. For instance, in the 1989 MTV *Video Music Awards* program, host Arsenio Hall framed college-radio favorites The Cure thus: 'They're nominees for one of our next categories. That is, postmodern video. In other words, the best video by a performer or a group that's brought an alternative music [sic]'.<sup>11</sup> This understanding of postmodernity has also leaked into the music press. The Los Angeles-based magazine *Hits* now publishes a 'Post Modern' chart and airplay listing (Jane's Addiction, Living Colour, Bob Mould, Sonic Youth, World Party, Depeche Mode), a 'PoMo Picks' review section (Prefab Sprout, Los Lobos, An Emotional Fish, The Cure) and a 'Post Toasted' gossip column! Interviewed in *Hits*, Arista Records Senior Vice-President of Sales and Distribution Rick Bleiweiss offers his definition of a Post-Modern act: 'Post Modern or alternative are wide-ranging terms. The acts I'm talking about are Urban Dance Squad, Kris McKay, the Church . . . We're treating Jimmy Ryser in a similar manner. While you couldn't call him alternative like some of the groups I've mentioned, the plan is the same.'<sup>12</sup>

A second definition takes a more literal approach, defining the category in relation to 'modern rock' – a catch-all category used by radio stations in the United States (such as KITS in San Francisco) to promote 1980s music, including the straightforward rock of bands like U2, but with special emphasis on the electro-pop of acts like Erasure and Depeche Mode. Postmodern music, here, refers to those acts who, chronologically speaking, come after 'Modern Rock'. This commonsense usage is not routine in the industry, but it is interesting, since it suggests that the Modern Rock acts have now become established as a genre not unlike 'Classic Rock', in some markets at least, which will generate its own 'alternative'.

Thirdly, postmodern rock can be defined as that music which follows punk, evacuating its articulation of political resistance. Groups like The Smiths, The Cure and New Order can thus be understood as a postmodern response to the 'defeat' of punk and the parallel rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism,<sup>13</sup> which is thus seen to 'explain' what has sometimes half-jokingly been described as this music's 'miserablism'. 'Industrial' music might also fit this pattern. The exact antithesis of what Herbert Marcuse

(1968) called 'affirmative culture', this music might constitute a form of postmodern resistance.

The debate about postmodernism in popular music has thus become newly complex in a unique way: since the postmodern is now a sales category/musical genre, in addition to being a theory, cultural condition and artistic practice, further analysis of its relation to music will have to take account of this epistemological feedback loop. But in the dominant usage established by the music industry itself (the first of the three listed above), the term constructs 'postmodern rock' just as I have suggested – as a synonym for 'art-rock'. The debate about postmodernism as it relates to cultural capital therefore continues to chip away at its own conceptual foundations.

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## Notes

- 1 On the album *I'm Real* (Scotti Bros./CBS Records, 1988) hip-hop musicians Full Force use samples (including extracts from James Brown's early career) to create the backing for James Brown's performance, which explicitly historicizes and celebrates his work – see, for example, 'Tribute' and 'Godfather'.
- 2 Jameson (1979) suggest a different parallel between pop and postmodernism, when he locates pop music as a 'simulacrum', in which there is no 'original' textual moment.
- 3 A strictly modernist reading is given of the David Byrne (of Talking Heads) movie *True Stories*, for instance, when it is read as a social parody, a satirical comment on alienation in a post-industrial society (see Coulson, 1987).
- 4 Even on *Songs From Liquid Days* (CBS Records, 1986), where Philip Glass collaborates with rock songwriters like David Byrne and Suzanne Vega, the musical setting typically undercuts any connection that the words might have forged with pop culture. Fusing the work of Laurie Anderson and the Kronos Quartet with a performance by Linda Ronstadt (on 'Forgetting') is something of a postmodern landmark – but how many Ronstadt fans will have heard it, let alone *understood* it?
- 5 A cursory glance at Laurie Anderson's performance video *Home of the Brave* will confirm the presence of alienated, episodic modes of presentation.
- 6 I am obliged to note, however, that at a Philip Glass concert in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall in June 1989, two members of the audience were seen playing 'air piano'!
- 7 These notes are taken from a programme for a concert given at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, 3 March 1990.
- 8 Billy Bragg, quoted *New Musical Express* 23/30 December 1989.
- 9 I am grateful to Paul Kendall for pointing this out to me. However, pop and rock remain so conventional, and – I would argue – realist/naturalist in form, through elements such as tonality, narrative musical development and song structure, that to elevate timbre to such a position of prominence surely fails to engage with the way that contemporary music is actually heard by its audiences.
- 10 See, for instance, the interview with Jean Baudrillard in *The Face* (Vol. 2, No. 4, January 1989); and the issue of *Rolling Stone* (18 May 1989) in which he is listed at that summer's 'Hot Philosopher King'.

- 11 *Music Video Awards*, MTV, September 1989. The winners in the postmodern music video category were another 'alternative' rock act, REM (for the clip 'Orange Crush'). The following year, the winning clip was from Sinéad O'Connor ('Nothing Compares 2 U' – a cover of a Prince song), the other contenders being Depeche Mode, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Tears for Fears.
- 12 See *Hits* Vol. 5, No. 209, 17 September 1990. I am grateful to Keith Negus for bringing this material to my attention.
- 13 I am grateful to Andrew Pogue for an explanation of this use of the term.

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